

House Agriculture Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, & Research

Economic Opportunities from Local Agricultural Markets

Tuesday February 11, 2020

Hello and Good Morning Chairwoman Plaskett, Ranking Member Dunn and committee members. My name is Bret Erickson and I am Senior Vice President of Business Affairs at J&D Produce Inc. I have worked in agriculture my entire career. Prior to joining J&D, I was President & CEO of the Texas International Produce Association and Executive Vice President for the Texas Vegetable Association for almost 6 years. I am quite familiar with the challenges you are exploring here today. As a former association executive, I spent a good amount of time developing ways to help promote and sustain local agriculture in Texas.

J&D is a family owned and operated business headquartered in Edinburg, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. Our owners, Jimmy & Diane Bassetti moved from Vineland, New Jersey to McAllen, Texas in 1984 and officially started the business in 1986. J&D is truly an American Dream that continues to thrive today. We are a grower/packer/shipper of fresh greens, sweet onions, cabbage, and melons. To give you an idea of the diversity of crops we grow, we produce almost 30 different types of greens alone, including numerous kales, chards, collards, mustard greens, kohlrabi, beets and herbs to name a few.

Most of the products we offer are grown on our own land and managed by our own people. However, we also work very closely with many other farmers in South Texas and handle their produce too. Our company helps those farmers by harvesting, washing, packing, marketing, selling and then collecting on those sales. We also help with things such as food safety, financing, and regulatory compliance for our smaller growers who might not otherwise have the ability to juggle those activities. Although our company may not be the 5 or 10 acre farm, we are very much still a family operation. The Bassetti's know each and every employee by name.

We are engaged in the local community in a wide range of activities: the Rio Grande Valley Citrus & Veg Day which introduces young children in 4-H & FFA to the harvesting and growing of fruits and vegetables; local donations of fresh produce to elementary middle and high schools; providing produce for the Healthy South Texas initiative with Texas A&M; donating and selling product to the Feeding Texas Food Banks system, donating and participating in school garden & salad bar initiatives in our community. Not to mention we sell directly to our local restaurants and schools, as well as host dieticians and chefs to tour our farms and packing operations to help promote and educate our local community about agriculture and fresh produce at the local level.

We also invest time and money in the local Universities as they develop and refine agricultural curriculum to develop local talent to fill our future job needs. Attracting talent to move to the Rio Grande Valley can be challenging, we know recruiting local talent for future jobs is the most sustainable solution for our industry.

We work hard to support our community, and to ensure that the citizens who live in Texas have access to locally grown fresh, safe, nutritious and healthy fruits and vegetables. We sell to numerous local restaurants and regional grocery chains in Texas, such as HEB, United, Whole Foods, and Kroger and we work hard to promote the fresh fruits and vegetables we grow.

Locally grown is very meaningful to us, especially in this day where international trade agreements and labor shortages continue to pressure and push companies like ours out of business. The J&D footprint in Texas was built by Jimmy & Diane, not by gift or consolidation. They built it together one day at a time, methodically over the course of 34 years, through hard-work, hard-times and hard-weather. They have lost and they have gained. They have been handed nothing but have grown the business so that it now supports 180 full time employees, that is 180 families, who are part of our own J&D family.

And their ability to grow their organization over these nearly 4 decades has been in no small part because they have been focused on locally grown. They have been focused on nutrition, health, access to affordable fruits and vegetables, and on protecting the American farmer. And as the recipient of the 2019 Vegetable Grower of the Year Award from American Vegetable Grower Magazine, J&D Produce is the embodiment of the American farmer.

In Texas, we have seen double digit increases year over year for the last decade for volumes of fresh fruits and vegetables. This is a bittersweet figure. J&D has increased the volumes of our own imported products for several reasons. One, that our business is growing and demand for fresh fruits and vegetables continues to grow, why? Simply because the population is growing and there are more mouths to feed. But we also have to import more product because we don't have the labor to harvest the volumes that are demanded by our customers.

Our organization strongly believes that if this government can address our agricultural labor shortages now, all the farmers that are represented here today can expand their operations tomorrow. The American farmer is being attacked on all fronts, mostly by regulations and rising resource costs, but there is no bigger disservice than preventing them from accessing the labor needed to pick our crops.

We have friends who farm in West and Central Texas who are limiting the size of their plantings or simply closing their operations because the labor shortage has not been addressed since 1986. I realize today's hearing is focused on local producers, but I would be remiss as a farming operation who prides themselves on the local aspect and who too is struggling to compete because of labor shortages. After all, you can't have local agriculture at our scale if you don't have a labor supply to sustain it.

Regardless, we believe there should be room for many different definitions of agricultural producers in America and we believe there are many different ways to reach communities and provide locally grown agricultural products throughout the country. As a company that has dedicated 34 years to "locally grown" campaigns and providing fresh fruits and vegetables, we also recognize that selling only local is not enough. We must be able to reach different markets in order to provide enough return to our company to continue for future seasons.

After all, if it were not for companies like J&D that grow fruits and vegetables in the winter months, where would states like Montana, the Dakotas, and most of the mid-west be looking for their fresh produce? We are their "winter salad-people." And likewise, during the summer months when South

Texas has 100+ degree days for 4 to 5 months in a row, we must depend on other regions to grow our fresh fruits and vegetables. We are dependent on other communities, just as they are dependent on us.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and God Bless the American Farmer.